

The Learning of Endangered Mother Tongue Languages of Minority, Immigrant Communities in Multilingual Contexts: The Case of Malayalam in Malaysia

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Abstract

Research (Nambiar, 2007) shows that the Malayalees, a minority, and immigrant community in multilingual and multiracial Malaysia, are shifting away from their mother tongue, Malayalam, towards English and Malay. One of the main reasons is the lack of proficiency in the mother tongue, particularly among the younger generations. This paper examines the reasons why learning of the ancestral language has not been successful and what remediation measures can be taken. While a number of factors such as lack of government support, paucity of trained teachers, out-dated teaching methodology, time and transport constraints can account for the lack of language learning success, the underlying factor seems to be the low priority accorded to language preservation by the community itself. Hence there is an urgent need to raise the awareness of the community regarding the significance of their ancestral language in preserving their unique identity as Malaysian Malayalees before instituting a number of language learning initiatives. These include a centralized language curriculum, up-to-date language teaching methodology, well-trained teachers, use of innovative teaching materials, as well as the setting up of learning institutions like a kindergarten and school where Malayalam teaching/ learning can be given its due.

Introduction

Malayalam, the mother tongue of the Malayalees of Kerala, India is not facing language death but Malayalam, the ancestral language of the Malayalee immigrant community in Malaysia, is in danger of dying. This rather paradoxical situation is not limited to the Malayalee immigrants alone; many other migrant communities the world over are experiencing the same phenomenon of language shift and loss leading to language death. Should it be of any concern since the language itself, as in the case of Malayalam, is not under any immediate siege since it is well and alive in Kerala, its home base, and probably in the Malayalee diaspora as well? We believe the issue requires immediate attention. Although the repercussions of a language per se becoming extinct are far more severe than that of the same language 'dying' within an immigrant community, the fact remains that the loss faced by the immigrant community is very real. In losing its mother tongue, it no longer has a language for "cultural reconstruction, and for greater cultural-self-regulation" (Fishman, 1991:17).

The last decade or two has witnessed tremendous interest among researchers in the issues of language death, loss, endangerment, and shift as there is a growing consensus that within the next few generations, the number of languages spoken throughout the world will be significantly reduced. According to Muhlhauser, 90 % of the world's languages will become extinct within the next 100 years unless action is taken ("Expert: 90pc", 1997). Linguists

who have studied the situation carefully agree that "over half of the world's languages are moribund, i.e. not effectively being passed on to the next generation" and that "within perhaps two generations, most languages in the world will die out" (Second newsletter of the Foundation for Endangered languages, cited in Crystal, 2000: viii). Where immigrant and minority communities are concerned, extensive research such as Clyne's (1985), Fishman's (1966) and Haugen's (1969), to name a few, have demonstrated that there is a definite decline in the retention of the mother tongue from one generation to the next.

Though such scenarios are unfolding all over the world, the impact is most keenly felt in multilingual settings with settlements of immigrant communities. Given South East Asia's linguistic diversity, it is not surprising that many of these languages which might be lost are spoken in this part of the world (Collins, 1998; Nettle and Romaine, 2000). In an increasingly globalized culture, the rapid endangerment and death of minority languages is a matter of widespread concern, not only among linguists and anthropologists but among all concerned with issues of cultural identity. It is against such a background that this study on the language of the Malaysian Malayalee community is set.

This paper examines the state of learning Malayalam, the mother tongue of a minority and immigrant community, the Malayalees, in the context of a plural, multiracial

nation, Malaysia, with particular reference as to why the learning of the heritage language has been unsuccessful and what remediation measures, if any, can be initiated.

A background of the Malayalee community in Malaysia including the status of Malayalam vis-à-vis the other languages in the country is presented in the next section. This is followed by an overview of the language shift occurring in the community while the fourth section focuses on the learning of Malayalam in the community – what efforts are currently being made – and the attendant results. The reasons for the lack of success in learning the language will be discussed in depth. The final section discusses some of the measures that can be taken to revitalize the learning of Malayalam in Malaysia.

The Malayalee community in Malaysia

The Malayalees in Malaysia originate from the region of Kerala in South India. Their mother tongue is Malayalam, which belongs to the Dravidian family of languages. Compared to other Dravidian languages, it is nearer to Tamil in grammar and vocabulary (Menon, 1996).

During the early 1900s, as the colonies of western European states, including Malaya (as Malaysia was known then), saw new developments in agriculture with the cultivation of cash crops, there grew a demand for manpower that could not be fulfilled by the indigenous community. The alternative was to induce migrants from countries like India that were well populated but had low economic activity. The workers who were brought over to work on the rubber plantations were predominantly Tamils, who originated from the state of Madras. The British management then realized that there was a need for supervisory staff to manage the large volume of labour. The Malayalees from Kerala were the obvious choice because there was already a highly evolved system of education in Kerala that allowed for clerks, conductors and other middle-level staff who could be easily recruited. More important, the Malayalees were conversant in English (an outcome of the British colonial policy) and as Malayalam shared many similarities with the Tamil language, the Malayalees formed an essential link between the British management and the Tamil-speaking plantation work force. Over the decades, while some of the Malayalees returned to Kerala, most stayed back to make Malaysia their home. Currently the Malayalee community in Malaysia numbers about 35,000 (Census Malaysia, 2000), which however accounts for less than 1 percent of the country's multiracial population.

The Malaysian setting

Malaysia with a population of 22 million people can be described as a plural society whose plurality is manifested in multiple facets - racially, religiously and linguistically. Currently there are three main racial groups in Malaysia, i.e. Malays and other indigenous groups (65.1%), Chinese (26%), Indians (7.7%) and other minorities (1.2%) (Census Malaysia 2000). While the Ma-

lays who form the majority of the population are categorised as indigenous, the non-Malays (the majority of whom are the Chinese and the Indians) are considered immigrant communities as the bulk of their ancestors were encouraged to come into the country by the British colonial regime.

In terms of language use, within each ethnic group there exists a variety of languages and dialects which facilitate intra- and interethnic communication. Officially, the national language and main medium of education is Malay, the language of the indigenous majority, the Malays, while English is the official second language and a compulsory language in the schools. Though Mandarin and Tamil medium schooling can be found at the primary school level, for the majority of Malaysians, there is effectively only one system – the national one where Malay is the main medium and English the second language. What then is the status of the languages of the immigrant communities (such as Malayalam) which are referred to as “immigrant languages” (Asmah, 1982)? The Malaysian Constitution while prioritizing the position of Malay, also grants that “no person shall be prohibited or prevented from using (otherwise than for official purposes), or from teaching or learning any other language” (Asmah, 1979:40).

Hence there is no official policy against the learning of “immigrant languages” but neither is there any real support. The majority of the speakers of languages whose mother tongue is not Malay would not be able to read or write in their mother tongues unless they have some form of formal education. In order to cater for the non-Malays in the national schools, the 1961 Education Act states that instruction will be provided in a pupil's own mother tongue, provided the parents of 15 or more students request it. In practice, this has mainly applied to the Mandarin and Tamil languages being taught as a single subject in some of the primary schools (Gaudart 1987). It is not surprising that this concept of pupil's own language (POL) classes has not been very popular because they have to be conducted outside the regular school hours. Furthermore, in the case of the minority communities like the Malayalees, the chances of finding 15 or more Malayalee pupils of the same age group studying in the same school is rather slim. As the Malaysian language policy only emphasises Malay and English, and to a lesser extent Tamil and Mandarin, it appears that “no serious attempt has been made to incorporate other minority languages” (Mohamad, 1998: xiii). Asmah (1982:30-31) concedes:

Definitely they (immigrant languages) cannot be placed on par with the national language but nevertheless they are part and parcel of the everyday and emotional life of their variegated communities. Their roles should be clearly defined such that while being confined to their own communities, they can still develop and flourish in the geographical and ethnic contexts in which they function.

In Malaysia, as Lasimbang et al (1992:335) point out, "Maintenance of the mother tongue is seen as a right, but still perhaps more of a problem than a resource in a nation trying to achieve unity within the context of multilingualism". Thus, there is hardly any real encouragement for the promotion of the languages of the other communities despite the assurance given by early language planners that "there was room for every language under the Malaysian sun" (Asmah, 1979:23).

It is clear that given the immigrant status of the community, Malayalam has no official standing in the country; it is neither the language of the government, school, university, nor the media; neither is it the language of commerce. Hence, its use is basically restricted to within its own small community.

Language shift in the Malayalee community

Nambiar (2007) in her study of language shift in the Malayalee community in Malaysia found that it was rapidly shifting away from Malayalam towards English and Malay, one of the main reasons being the lack of ability of the members to use the mother tongue. About one-tenth of the 341 respondents claimed they cannot understand the language at all; a quarter cannot speak it and about three-quarter are unable to read or write in Malayalam. What is even more worrying is that there is decreasing proficiency from the first to the fourth generations. For instance, apart from the first generation that had migrated from Kerala, hardly any of the other respondents could read or write in Malayalam.

In other words, there is no or limited inter-generational transmission of the mother tongue, a case which 'qualifies' Malayalam in Malaysia to be considered a moribund language according to the Foundation for Endangered Languages' classification: "Over half of the world's languages are *moribund*, i.e. not effectively being passed on to the next generation" (cited by Crystal, 2000:19). Malayalam could also be considered a *potentially endangered* language based on the five-level classification used by Stephen Wurm (1998) cited in Crystal (2000:21): languages that "are socially and economically disadvantaged, under heavy pressure from a larger language, and beginning to lose child speakers".

Whichever the classification used, it is apparent that the mother tongue of the Malayalees in Malaysia is in some form of danger and action needs to be taken to prevent further deterioration. The situation is made worst by the fact that the use of Malayalam has drastically reduced even for intra community communication and in domains where it can be expected to survive such as the family/home and for inner speech or personal functions like counting, telling the time or speaking to god (Nambiar, 2007).

Efforts at learning Malayalam

As discussed earlier, the government policies do not favour the learning of minority languages. Given this scenario, what is the community itself doing to maintain its language?

Are there attempts to learn/teach the language? How successful have these been? What are the stumbling blocks, if any? And finally, what can be done to alleviate the situation? To address these issues, data was gathered through interviews with community elders including four office bearers of the Malayalee associations or Kerala Samajam which have been set up by the community in different parts of Malaysia for the social and cultural well-being of the community. Parents whose children cannot speak Malayalam as well as those currently learning Malayalam were also interviewed to find out what motivates or de-motivates the learning of the language. Thirdly, in order to obtain a first hand experience of how Malayalam classes are conducted, the researchers managed to observe only two classes as Malayalam classes were scarce. Finally interviews were conducted with six teachers of Malayalam, four of whom were not teaching currently, to gain an understanding of the problems they face/d. The findings are discussed below.

Learning of Malayalam

It appears that very few Malayalees are truly interested in learning Malayalam or ensuring their children learn the language although they may lament the community's decreasing proficiency in their mother tongue. Our research shows that those who are involved in Malayalam maintenance activities including organizing language classes or supporting them are only a handful and they are mainly those who had undergone education in Kerala or are first generation migrants.

According to the *Kerala Samajam* officials, many of the associations have held or are conducting Malayalam classes for the children of their members as well as non-members, with varying degrees of success. More often or not, the classes have not been successful as substantiated by the annual report of one of the Samajam, "The response (to Malayalam classes) from the younger generation is very disappointing" (AMMA, 1998: 44).

Generally, where the classes are concerned, the initial enthusiasm tends to die down after some time and numbers dwindle. The comments below from two informants represent the general picture:

- *The AMMA (coordinating body of the Malayalee associations) of which I'm a founder member has been organizing Malayalam classes for children for a long time. There will be usually about 20 students but eventually the class closes down due to poor attendance. There just isn't enough encouragement from the parents.*
- *Fatima Church used to have Malayalam classes for Malayalee Christians. I teach Malayalam but those who are interested don't have enough time or have transport problems.*

In these cases it appears that the opportunities for learning the mother tongue have been available but have not been utilized successfully. There are also a few cases

where there is interest to learn but due to a number of factors (which are discussed below), the desire has not been realized.

Reasons for lack of success in learning the language

It is difficult to identify a precise cause-and-effect sequence for the present situation since the factors involved frequently intermesh. However one underlying factor for lack of Malayalam ability as well as the lack of success in learning the language is the attitude of the community which places low priority on their mother tongue. The language has no utilitarian value to the community; it cannot be used for inter-ethnic communication in the multilingual setting or more important, it cannot facilitate economic mobility. It is understandable that when the fore fathers migrated to Malaya, staying afloat economically was foremost in their minds. In this they were greatly facilitated by the head-start they had with the English language. The learning of the mother tongue was somewhat neglected. According to the informants, about 10% of the parents intentionally discouraged their children from learning Malayalam because the parents wanted the children to be proficient in other languages considered more important for upward mobility in the host country. According to a 43 year old second generation informant:

- *My father encouraged me and my siblings to use English. He was of the old school of thought – he believed English is the most important language. We felt deprived; no opportunity to pick up Malayalam, no encouragement from father. We use English because all around us, everybody spoke English. We're very conscious of our inability to speak proper Malayalam.*

This attitude is substantiated from the comments of some of the parents who expressed regret that they had failed to ensure that their children learnt Malayalam:

- *The present generation who came from Kerala will soon die off. Unfortunately we haven't passed on the language to our children. It's very sad – Malayalam will eventually become a dead language like Sanskrit.*
- *I wish I had concentrated on using Malayalam with my children. Once they started school, they refused to speak in Malayalam. Even then we're at fault; my husband and I didn't insist. Unlike other ethnic groups such as the Chinese who generally communicate with their own kind in their mother tongue, the Malayalees have forgotten their language. Perhaps it's because in this country we need English and Malay more than Malayalam.*

What is unfortunate is that such decisions like actively or indirectly not encouraging children to learn their mother tongue, for whatever good intentions, has long term implications as these children are unable to transmit the language to the next generation, irrespective of whether

they desire to. At best, the language the younger generations are exposed to is already a diluted version of the language.

Reasons such as lack of time and transport problems were commonly cited by the informants but as an informant suggested, it could all stem from the low priority accorded to Malayalam in the face of so many activities that present generation of children are subjected to in order to stay competitive.

The other frequently mentioned reason was the inability on the part of students to cope with the learning of Malayalam and the subsequent embarrassment they face. According to the respondents:

- *Malayalam is a difficult language to speak. For instance the pronunciation for "rain" and "mountain" is so similar. I get put off by the difficult pronunciation. People laugh when I say the wrong words.*
- *I want to speak Malayalam but when I make mistakes, I feel so uncomfortable. It's not worth it.*

This reason needs to be studied carefully because Malayalam is not an easy language to learn. As one of the teachers interviewed attested, being heavily Sanskritized, mastery of Malayalam requires a great deal of effort compared to English, Tamil or Malay. A slight slip in pronunciation can lead to great confusion. The first researcher, while observing some children trying hard to speak on stage in Malayalam, noticed that the proficient adult speakers in the audience were very critical of the children. Such attitudes do little to encourage the learning of the language. Furthermore being close to the Tamil language in structure and lexis, if Malayalam is not correctly enunciated, it can sound like Tamil. According to *Samajam* officials, Malayalees, especially the first generation migrants and those educated in Kerala, are particularly sensitive about adulteration from Tamil, as they perceive it to be the language of the *coolies* (labourers) whom they had 'lorded over' in the British plantations. Such a purist and selective stance against influences from Tamil (the Malayalees are far more tolerant towards English borrowings and code-mixing) means many Malayalees are afraid to use Malayalam for fear of being belittled.

Another pertinent issue that emerged from the interviews was that even those who had acquired the language from their parents or grandparents or through more formal ways, often lost their proficiency due to a combination of factors – lack of opportunity or no necessity to use the language as well as lack of confidence in using it. Commented a 16 year old:

- *I've taken Malayalam classes but haven't benefited from them because I seldom use the language.*

Proficiency and use are clearly inter-related. Proficiency alone is not sufficient to ensure language maintenance; there must be a need which can only be fulfilled by using Malayalam. Apparently, in the case of the community, there is no functional differentiation of language – almost all needs can be met through English or Malay (Nambiar, 2007).

While some have opportunities to learn the language but do not, there are also situations where there are not sufficient learners to form a class or where tutors are not available. Lamented a 63 year old born in Malaysia:

- *Chances are Malayalam will die off in this country in say about 30 years' time. The community is dispersed and it's not possible to cluster together. Thus we can't carry out or enjoy certain facilities, for instance, our children can't get together for Malayalam classes.*

The lack of Malayalam teachers, teaching facilities and teaching methods came across very clearly during the researchers' observation of Malayalam classes. To begin with, it was very difficult to locate Malayalam classes for observation as they are simply not available. With all due respect to the teachers of the classes that were observed, the researchers noted a number of issues which need serious attention:

- i. the teachers are not trained in teaching Malayalam or any language for that matter. Besides those observed, interviews with other teachers also revealed that none of them had any formal training; they are basically Malayalees who can speak, read and write Malayalam and wish to pass on their knowledge either for the love of the language or for some small remuneration.
- ii. the teachers are aged and the students are young. According to the vice-president of the All Malaysian Malayalee Association (AMMA), all the teachers who turned up for a Malayalam teachers' seminar held 3 years ago by the Association were between 60 to 70 years of age. While not a crime in itself, it implies that there is a great gap in experiences between both learners and teachers and this can impact on the teaching and learning situation.
- iii. Out-dated methodology is used to teach the language. As the teachers are not trained, they merely teach Malayalam the way they learnt it decades ago. The pedagogy employed is a cross between the audio-lingual and grammar-translation methods. Students are taught the letters of the alphabet, all 57 of them, and these have to be memorized before any other teaching occurs. There seems to be more emphasis on writing and reading than on speaking. This tends to discourage learners as the literacy skills are more difficult to master. The teaching materials are limited to simple readers from Kerala which are not appropriate for older children. One of the students, a 12 year old, reluctantly admitted that reading was a chore because the text used was about fables which she had read in English when she was 6 years old! What is deemed as conversational Malayalam involves the teacher uttering a sentence or phrase in English and the student translating it into Malayalam. Other than that, students laboriously copy out words and phrases given by the teacher. On the positive side, in one class there was singing of hymns and recitation of poems, which the students seemed to like.

- iv. There is no definite duration for the classes; they go on indefinitely till the students drop out or the teacher has something else to do. In other words, there is little or no goal setting involved to motivate learners.

The informants confirmed that the observations of the researchers were not confined to those classes they observed; it is generally representative of Malayalam classes in this country. At the risk of belittling the efforts of those who are trying to organize Malayalam classes and those who are trying to teach the language, it must be said that the state of Malayalam teaching in Malaysia leaves much to be desired.

Measures to Revitalize Malayalam Learning

Change in Attitude of Community

Any initiative to arrest the decline in the language as well as to improve the language learning situation in Malaysia will have to start with the community. As Grenoble and Whaley (1998: xi) state, "...the community or a significant part of it must be committed to the success of a language program before it is initiated".

While acknowledging that "it requires enormous social and psychological self-confidence for any small group to insist on the importance of ancestral-language retention" (Dorian, 1998:20), there has to be a change in the attitude of the community towards their language. They should no longer feel that it will thwart their competency in more 'useful' languages like English and Malay. Malayalam cannot and will not be a threat to the other languages.

The older Malayalees will also have to accept the fact that the younger generations born in Malaysia do not have the same loyalty or outlook towards Kerala or Malayalam. Furthermore, with the advent of globalization, the individual no longer feels compelled to owe allegiance to his mother tongue. Given this scenario, the community has to be encouraged to view their own language with pride and as a symbol of their identity, not as Indians or Malayalees from Kerala but as Malaysian Malayalees. In other words, they should view Malayalam as uniquely theirs, not necessarily that which has to be imported from Kerala. This also implies that language purists will have to soften their stand towards the 'variety' of Malayalam that is evolving in Malaysia. A non-compromising attitude which insists on "pure" Malayalam or the high variety will only expedite the demise of the language.

The first step towards language preservation lies in the awareness that there is a need to maintain the mother tongue. The Malayalees need to be, if necessary, shocked out of their complacency towards the reality of losing their language since there is no immediate threat and the consequences of language loss are usually only visible in the long run. The task of creating this awareness among the Malayalees has to rest mainly with the AMMA and its local affiliates since they have access to newsletters

and they also host regular social occasions where they can reach out to the community members. Academics and researchers have to be part of this campaign to lend credibility and urgency.

Improving the teaching situation

Secondly a central body has to be set up to thoroughly review and structure the teaching scenario, including the curriculum, pedagogy, duration of courses, training of teachers and so forth. The ideal people to set up this body would again be the AMMA and its associates. These associations would also be in the best position to provide or solicit sponsorship for the classes. They only need to act as coordinators since there are many experienced educators in the Malayalee community who are prepared to lend their expertise for a good cause. These people may not be able to teach Malayalam but they know how to teach languages. They would be able to plan out the curriculum, pedagogy etc as well as train those who are well versed in Malayalam and interested to teach. If necessary, expertise from Kerala can be called upon but only in an advisory capacity. The focus should always be pragmatic - teach Malayalam for use in Malaysia among Malaysian Malayalees.

Hence in line with such thinking, a communicative teaching approach would be most appropriate whereby teaching /learning is targeted towards language use in the real world (Fishman, 1991). Fluency and not accuracy (Bailey, 2003) should be the initial target. This encourages willingness to communicate, and serves to develop self-confidence and risk-taking (MacIntyre, et al, 2001; Yashima, 2002.) Courses should be short (not more than three months) and focused on single skills, beginning with speaking. In this way, interest can be sustained and students will not have the opportunity to drop out as the course is short anyway. Moreover, there is instant gratification in learning – one will be able to use what is learnt almost immediately, assuming there are opportunities to use it. Certificates of achievement should be awarded at the completion of each module, not only to motivate learners but also as an indicator of their proficiency level.

Teaching methods need to be meaningful, interesting and up to date. In fact, Brown (2007) insists on meaningful learning for greater retention of language input. The classes can incorporate audio-video aids, including films, songs, etc which will also provide the much needed exposure to the target language. Even more pertinent, in the days of the Internet, this is one facility that should be exploited to the hilt (This is not the case at present and it is most likely because many of the teachers, being elderly, are not familiar with the Internet). Teachers can refer learners to specific websites which teach Malayalam (the researchers have checked some of these out and found that these sites have potential) and set students work which can be completed in their own time and together with other learners. Such course materials help learning to move from a transmission mode to a participatory one (Richard-Amato, 2003).

Besides these teaching-related initiatives, some small means of encouraging language use can also be attempted. Some of the reasons for not learning Malayalam have been the lack of transport as well as opportunity to use what has been learnt. Instead of leaving their children at the Malayalam teacher's house and waiting two to three hours to pick them up or returning home and getting stressed out in traffic, parents could also join their children in learning the language. Not only would this enhance bonding but would also facilitate language learning and language use outside the class. This would also address one of the major grouses of the teachers – the students hardly practice using the language as contact hours are only once a week.

Setting up of Malayalam Learning Institutions

While the measures noted above basically improve upon the existing system and can be considered short term, there are other initiatives that require more planning and financial commitment.

One such initiative involves the setting up of a kindergarten in the Klang Valley which has a high concentration of Malayalees. The idea is to teach the mother tongue to the children at an early age, before they start formal schooling. The AMMA which has mooted this idea plans to bring in teachers and teaching materials from Kerala. The institution will be administered by the AMMA but the teaching aspect will be left entirely to the Keralites. The researchers feel such an initiative is laudable but as mentioned earlier, there first must be an awareness raising campaign amongst the community before any measures can be implemented successfully. Secondly, we also believe that the local Malayalees must supervise the teaching curriculum, materials, etc. so that students are taught Malayalam which is functional and which incorporates local content wherever possible. For instance, some amount of reading materials could be based on the lives and culture of the Malayalees in Malaysia. Besides learning the language, children will also get much needed exposure to their culture, an area sadly neglected.

Along the same line as the kindergarten, the researchers propose the setting up of a full-fledged school which besides teaching the same curriculum set by the Malaysian government, also offers Malayalam classes to the students. Such a venture is not inconceivable as the researchers found that a school along similar lines had been set up by the Punjabis, another immigrant minority from India and whose population in Malaysia is comparable to that of the Malayalees.

For the Malayalee school to be successful, the full support of all Malayalees in the particular locale is paramount. However, considering that the number of Malayalees with school-going children may not be sufficient to support a school, the alternative would be to open it to all Malaysians. Learning of Malayalam would be optional. What is important is to ensure that the school is run better

than the national schools which have been heavily criticized for poor teaching and administrative practices. If parents can be convinced that by attending such a school, their children would not lose out in any way and that it would not stretch their finances too much, they would be interested. The plus points are that their children would have an excellent learning environment with dedicated teachers and state-of-the-art facilities and in addition, have the opportunity to study Malayalam. From the financial perspective, such an institution is within the ambit of the Malayalee community which is basically middle class and one which places a high premium on education as the means to upward economic mobility (Nambiar, 2007). If the community is committed to preserving its language, such an initiative (which will need to be carefully worked out) will be an excellent means to achieve it.

Other Measures

Besides the measures already outlined, there are two others which involve lobbying by the community. One would be to ask the government to reduce the number of students necessary before the school can offer POL classes, for instance from the current minimum of 15 to 5 pupils in a school. This will still mean that classes will have to be conducted outside school hours but at least there would be higher chances of locating 5 Malayalee students in a school. Secondly, in order to overcome the current limited exposure to Malayalam, the community should negotiate for more Malayalam-based programs to be aired over private cable television. However taking into consideration the views of our informants, especially the young ones, there must be subtitles in English as they claim the Malayalam used in movies is "too high flown" for most of them. Though there might be the fear that viewers would be dependent on the subtitles and not the language, we believe crutches like these are essential for getting people 'hooked' on to things Malayalee.

Conclusion

The study has shown that there are many reasons why the learning of Malayalam has been less than successful but the underlying factor is the community's attitude towards its language. The Malayalees in Malaysia are facing language loss, resulting in a vicious cycle of reduced proficiency leading to reduced use and so on. Being an immigrant and a minority community, its energies are directed towards staying afloat in a setting where race and religion affect economic advancement. Under such circumstances, understandably, mother tongue preservation has low priority. Any of the measures recommended in this paper for successful learning of Malayalam will only bear fruit if the community is fully committed to preserving its language. Since the long term ramifications of language loss cannot be envisaged immediately, there is an urgent need to raise the community's awareness. It has to realize that its culture and identity are intertwined with its mother tongue. It also has to come to terms with the reality that the Malayalam that is evolving in Malaysia may not be identical to that in Kerala.

What is paramount is that there must be commitment and passion to preserve Malaysian Malayalam, one which is pragmatic and which gives the Malayalees in this country their unique identity.

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